

Child of summer by Thei

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Summary:

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As he lies on his back, choking on black goo and trying to breathe despite the holes in his chest, he thinks about the woman that predicted all of this, years ago. He wonders if she saw all of it play out just like this. Wonders if he would have believed her if she'd told him what would happen.

Probably not.

1. Chapter 1

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Probably not. If she'd told him about *monsters*, he would have brushed her off as crazy. Perhaps that would have been preferable to what actually happened, that sunny Saturday, seven years ago. When a woman told him his future, and he chose to believe her.

Billy was eleven years old, and he hadn't seen his mom in a year. Hadn't heard her voice in six months, and at this point he wasn't sure if he remembered how it used to sound. He had a nagging suspicion that if she called him now, he wouldn't recognize her voice.

It wasn't something he liked thinking about, though, so he didn't. When he was at home, it was difficult to not think about it, because when he was at home he missed her. It was just easier to spend more time outside the house, with his friends, and he was often out the door as soon as he could in the morning, and staying out as late as he was allowed (and sometimes longer; paying the price for staying out past curfew with bruises on his skin). When he was with his friends, it was easy to forget his troubles. His absent mother, his strict father, his father's new wife and the little girl who his father said he had to call his sister.

He didn't have to think about all that, when he was with his friends. Because his friends all had troubles too – some worse than Billy's – and they all knew better than to bring it up. Instead, they distracted themselves with having fun – they roamed around town, they played sports and

fought each other, rolled around in the sand, watched the older boys smoke and drink and tried to copy them, tried to look as cool as they did.

They lifted candy from the grocery store sometimes, and once, Carlos stole a lady's wallet right out of her purse as the rest of them distracted her – she had over forty dollars there, and they spent it all in one night.

Point was, that he was happy with his friends. They were a tight-knit group of kids who were just like him.

Today, they were at the fair. It was free to enter, although you had to pay for everything else; food, rides, games. They didn't have any money, but that had never stopped them from having fun before.

Like now, when they had gotten tired of walking around and instead sat down on a small staircase leading up to a trailer, pointing at people who walked past and commenting on why they wouldn't want to be like them when they grew up. Adults were horrible, they all agreed. Most of them were ugly, too.

"Look at that one," Kevin said, pointing at a harried father of three. "He's so fat! Probably eats lard for breakfast." The others laughed.

"What about that one?" Gabriel said and pointed at another man, with some kind of skin condition. "He's all spotty, eww."

Scott didn't want to be left out either, pointing at a third man. "Look at that one's nose! It's all big and purple, he's probably a drunk." He sneered. "A disgusting drunk!" If anyone would know, Billy thought, it'd be Scott. Scott's dad drank a lot.

And so it went, them taking turns in making fun of the people passing by. It was a nice warm day, and there were lots of people milling about. Lots of faults to point out. The boys laughed, and promised each other that they would never end up like these people. They were only just getting ready to get up and move on when the door to the trailer slammed open and a woman's voice said, "You boys shouldn't be so quick to judge other people for what isn't their fault."

Billy jumped, and his heart skipped a beat, because for a second ... it sounded like his mom. Or, like he imagined his mom to sound. But of

course, when he turned around it wasn't her. It was just a lady, some old woman with graying hair, who glared down at them from the top of the stairs.

Billy swallowed his disappointment and glared back. "Oh yeah? How about you mind your own fucking business, lady?" His friends snickered at that.

The woman's eyes narrowed and she stepped out through the door, leaning down over them. Joe backed down a bit, and so did Carlos, but Billy – who was closest to her – stood his ground, jutting out his chin in defiance.

"You're on my property," the woman said, voice low. "And you're talking about a future you don't know anything about."

"Oh, and you do?" Billy huffed, glancing at his friends like 'are you guys hearing this?' and rolling his eyes.

"I know more than you," the woman said, and turned to Scott. "I know that you'll turn out like your father if you aren't careful." And then she turned to Gabriel. "I know that after this year, you won't see your sister ever again." And Joe; "And you, just because your mother is sick, it doesn't mean that you get to make fun of other people who may or may not be suffering."

The boys gaped and stared, because those were sensitive topics that they didn't speak of. She must have heard them through the door somehow, maybe they had mentioned all of those things without meaning to, and now she used it against them. Billy was filled with righteous anger on all of their behalf – because these were his friends' sore spots she was poking at – so he yelled "Shut up!" and pushed her with all of his might.

Billy was just eleven years old, but he was the strongest one out of all his friends. The woman stumbled back and caught herself on the doorframe, which stopped her from falling. Billy, though, lost his balance on one of the steps and fell forward, catching himself on the metal steps with both hands, but hitting his chin on the edge of the one of them. His teeth clacked shut and tears sprung up in his eyes.

Distantly, he heard his friends yell and scatter – it was what they all usually did, when confronted with an angry adult they didn't know. Billy

tried to get up too, to follow them, but bony fingers clamped around his wrist and pulled him up. Another hand touched his face, none too gently, and he blinked the daze out of his eyes and swatted at the woman's hands. "Let go of me!"

"You're bleeding, child." Her voice wasn't unkind, but her eyes were cold. He swatted at her again, with his free hand, which only resulted in her grabbing his other wrist, too.

And Billy didn't do well at being restrained. His eyes widened and his breath quickened. He aimed a kick at her leg and yelled again, "Let go of me, you bitch!"

Her eyes hardened and she easily sidestepped his kicks, and pulled his arms up and against the metal railing.

"Be still," she said, but Billy couldn't, not when he was being held against his will. He looked around desperately for his friends, but they had already run off; probably expected him to escape, too. He pulled on the woman's grip, but she didn't let go. "Be still, boy."

And it sounded so much like his father's words, coming from a voice that reminded him of his mother, that angry tears welled up in his eyes that had nothing to do with the pain in his jaw. He increased his efforts to get away, tried to pull out of her grip and wriggled in her grasp. "Let go! Let go! You fucking bitch, let me go!"

"I'll let you go when you calm down," the woman said, voice as hard as her grip on his wrists. "You shouldn't make fun of people for things they can't do anything about."

"You can't tell me what to do!" Billy snarled, anger and hurt bubbling up. "You're not my mother!"

"No," the woman said. "I'm not. But she's not here to tell you this, is she? She left you."

Billy's breath caught in his throat. He knew he hadn't said anything about his mother – he never talked about her out loud – so how did this woman know that?

"Shut up," he said, instead of asking. His voice wavered. "You don't know

anything.”

The woman actually laughed at that. “Oh, child. We’ve already established that I know many things.”

A tendril of fear went through Billy when she leaned in and looked him in the eye. “I know you are alone. I know you’ll be alone for a long time.”

“Shut up,” Billy said, but his voice was weak. He’d stopped trying to get away.

“I know that your father is angry, and that he’s making you angry, too.”

“Shut up!”

“I know that you are born in the midst of summer, in a sweltering July.”

Billy jumped at that, at the first thing she says that didn’t ring true. “You’re wrong! I was born in April, you ... you cow!” Her grip tightened as he renewed his efforts to get away, and she grimaced as he managed to land a kick to her shin. She shook him, not hard, but enough to make him stop kicking.

“I am not wrong,” she hissed, face close to his. “You’re a scared, violent boy and you will grow up scared and violent, and you will die young, do you hear me? You will die young! Before you’re fully grown.”

And her eyes were hard and piercing, and it felt as if she was glaring holes in Billy’s soul. And that tendril of fear turned into terror. Billy’s heart was beating hard and he felt cold all over, even though it was a warm day. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from hers, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood up and he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t move ...

Until she let go of him, abruptly. Billy stumbled back down the last couple of steps and fell hard on his back in the grass, heart pounding his chest. He scrambled back, not caring about his aching jaw, his sore wrists – he kept his eyes on the woman in case she would come after him.

She didn’t. She stayed in the doorway, and there was a look on her face that he couldn’t place. She looked almost overwhelmed, and perhaps a bit regretful. But then she stood up straight and her face hardened again.

"Remember this, child of summer. Very few people get second chances. Those have to be earned." There was steel in her voice, and Billy didn't want to hear this, didn't want to look at her anymore, he just wanted to get as far away from her as possible – so he scrambled up and started running. He didn't care where – just, anywhere, away from here. He could hear her shout behind him. "You can't run from it, boy! The only way out is through! You can't run!"

But oh, Billy ran.

He ran until he couldn't run anymore, until his breath stung in his lungs, until he was sweating. But the chill wouldn't go away. Despite the warm day, he found himself shivering.

Later, when he was back with his friends and they asked what happened, Billy had had time to put himself together. He told them that he called her a cow and kicked her until she let go of him – not exactly a lie, but not the whole truth either – and they laughed and nodded appreciatively.

"What a bitch," Scott said, and the others nodded.

But then they got quiet. No one said anything for a while, until Joe said, "Do you think she knew those things for real?"

Billy swallowed, hard. Wouldn't let himself think about it. "No," he said.

"Her trailer said she was a fortune teller, though," Joe continued. "And she knew all those things about us. About my mom." While they contemplated this new information, he turned to Billy. "Did she say anything to you?"

You are alone. Your father is angry. You can't run.

You will die young.

"No," Billy said, forcing himself to shrug. The chill was back, but he didn't let it show.

They never spoke of it again.

He might never have spoken of it again, but the strange chill returned from time to time from that day, and Billy knew what it meant. It was a reminder that whatever the woman had said – whether it was a warning or a curse – was true.

He grew up scared, just like she'd said. He grew up in violence, just like she'd said. His father was an angry man, so Billy became angry too – and he couldn't run from it.

All of it was just like she'd said, so he knew it was just a matter of time before the last part of her prophecy came true, too. Billy was going to die, and soon.

He laughs, now. Lying on the floor of the mall, consumed by pain, vision blurry and with the world going dark at the edges, he laughs. Or tries to. Thick black not-blood is choking him, and the pain is so intense, and he can't move. He wonders, not for the first time (but maybe the last), if the woman knew this would happen. If she saw this in his future.

Or maybe she cursed him, that day. Made all of this happen.

It doesn't matter. It's like she said. Very few people get second chances. Billy's known for years that he's not one of those people. That he would meet his end, sooner rather than later.

The dark is closing in. The chill, that has been present for days now, is taking over his body. He's shivering, and it hurts, it hurts so bad.

Drawing breath is too much of an effort. He can't see anything anymore, but doesn't remember closing his eyes. He can still hear, though. Voices. Screams. They sound far away. Soon they go quiet, too.

Billy dies there, on the floor of a newly-built mall, next to the body of a monster right out of a nightmare.

He's eighteen, when he dies.

2. Chapter 2

Billy is reborn in the midst of summer, in a sweltering July.

It's a surprise. When he died on that mall floor, he never expected to wake up. He knew his time was up, had known it for years. Because second chances had to be earned, and Billy had never done anything to earn something like that.

Yet he wakes up.

He almost wishes he hadn't. Everything hurts, and tears are escaping his eyes and making their way down his temples, into his hair. He tries to speak, but only a weak croak escapes him – something's lodged in his throat and it *hurts*. Apparently whatever sound he makes is enough for someone to hear him though, because a blurry shape shows up in his vision.

"Holy shit," he hears. "Hargrove? Can you hear me?"

The voice is familiar, but he can't place it. He manages another croak, and winces at the pain of it.

"Holy *shit*," the voice says again, and then, further away but louder, "Nurse! Anyone! He's awake!"

Billy closes his eyes, listens to the voice. It's a comfort, hearing someone say that he's awake. It makes it less likely that this is a dream, or some kind of fucked-up afterlife.

He feels hands on his body, jostling him. The pain makes him gasp, but then there's a comforting hand brushing hair away from his forehead and a floating sensation that makes the pain ebb away. He exhales, inhales, exhales again ...

... and he's out.

He's still in pain the next time he wakes up, but it's more manageable this time around. He spots an IV in his arm and follows the tube to a

clear bag of some kind of fluid, and surmises that whatever is in it is keeping the pain at bay.

There are sounds around him, beeping and whirring, and when he turns his head on the pillow he's lying on, he sees that he's hooked up to all sorts of machines. He realizes that he's heard the beeping and whirring for a long time, even before he woke up.

But he's awake. That fact in itself is ... not what he expected.

He fumbles with one hand on his chest, where he remembers being speared through by a monster. There is no hole there, but he's covered in thick bandages, and the lightest of touches makes pain flare up, so he drops his hand to his side again and exhales.

He doesn't know how long he's lying there, but eventually the door opens and he hears voices outside, and *that* voice, the same voice he heard before, is at the door. When Billy turns his head, someone's just walking into the room.

That someone is Steve Harrington, and he freezes in place when he sees that Billy is watching him from the bed he's lying in.

"Shit, Hargrove? Are you awake?"

"Uh," Billy says, because it would seem so but at the same time it's very likely that this is all some kind of dream or hallucination.

Harrington seems to take that as an answer, and hurries to his side. "How are you feeling?" Then he grimaces. "No, wait, ugh, never mind that. Are you in pain? Blink once for yes, two times for no."

Billy blinks. Not as an answer, but out of sheer bafflement. Why is Steve Harrington here, and why is he talking to Billy? Where is 'here'? Why is Harrington's face full of half-healed bruises? *Did Billy do that?*

Unfortunately, Harrington seems to take Billy's one bewildered blink as a sign that he's in pain, and his face scrunches up as he starts to fiddle with the IV. "Oh, um, they said you were on some painkillers but that if you woke up and you were in pain, they could up the dose ..."

Billy croaks out, “No,” not even minding the way it makes his throat hurt. Harrington stops, and turns to Billy, who tries to continue. “Not in ... pain.” He grimaces, and when Harrington lifts a skeptical eyebrow, he amends, “Not *much* ... pain.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Harrington says, so low that Billy’s not sure if it’s meant for him. “Two weeks ago, you were speared through.”

Ah, so it *did* happen. Wasn’t a dream.

Harrington brings a plastic cup of water to his lips, and helps Billy drink. It helps, but Billy’s confusion grows. When he’s taken a couple of sips, and his tongue feels less like a piece of wood in his mouth, he licks chapped lips and asks, “What ... happened?”

Harrington pulls up a chair and sits down on it. He takes a deep breath, as if preparing himself for something uncomfortable. “How much do you remember?”

Billy considers this. Frowns. “All of ... it.” He wishes he didn’t.

“All right,” Harrington says, and proceeds to fill in the blanks. A place called the Upside Down, the shadow (that he calls “the mindflayer”, which Billy silently agrees is a good name for it), monsters and kids with powers. Human experiments, gates to other dimensions, evil Russians.

It’s a lot. And right now, Billy doesn’t care about any of it. He’s tired, but what he really wants to know is, “Why are ... you here?”

“Oh!” Harrington says, looking surprised. “Well, those Russians I told you about? Well, there was this whole ... interrogation thing ... and they injected me and Robin with some kind of drug, and no one really knew what it was so they kept us for observation for over a week. We just got discharged, like, four days ago.”

Billy doesn’t know who Robin is, and what Harrington said is a lot. And it still doesn’t make sense. If Harrington got discharged, then why is he *here*? “Then ... why ...?”

Harrington *finally* seems to get what he’s asking, because he looks down at his hands, his face going a little pink.

“You ... you got in the way when that thing tried to kill El. You saved her. Saved *us*.” He doesn’t look at Billy when he continues, “I guess, I just didn’t want you to wake up alone.”

It gives Billy more questions than answers, and he must make some kind of face because Harrington hurries to add, “I mean, I’m sure your parents would be here if they could!” Billy has his doubts, but doesn’t say anything. “But this whole thing, monsters and government experiments ... you know? It’s all very hush-hush. Only those who already know about it has been told. And, well, your parents, they aren’t ... they don’t know. Yet. That you’re ... um. Alive.”

Harrington looks all apologetic about this, but Billy is grateful. If he can pretend that his father hasn’t shown up because he doesn’t know that Billy is alive, then that sure beats knowing that his father doesn’t show up because he doesn’t care enough about him to check on him.

Harrington continues, without prompting. “Max knows, of course, but she had to sign all those papers just like the rest of us. But she can’t come here by herself, without anyone taking her. She asked me to check on you. Keep her updated.”

Billy relaxes. That makes more sense than Harrington being here for any other reason, like actually *caring* or something.

As if he’s reading Billy’s mind, Harrington gets a determined look on his face and adds, “But I would have come to visit you anyway. Even if she hadn’t asked me.”

And Billy is *tired*. He doesn’t understand. “Why?”

Harrington licks his lips and glances at him. “El told us some things.” Billy remembers the girl, the one the shadow wanted so badly; he remembers her in his mind, in his memories. A chill runs through him, at what she might know. At what, exactly, she might have told them. “About your ... situation, I guess. A little of what you went through, with the mindflayer. And, like ...” Harrington seems to have a hard time finding words, and he’s looking everywhere except at Billy. “... You sacrificed yourself for her, Hargr... Billy. You fought a monster for her. For all of us.”

He pulls on his hair, a nervous gesture that somehow calms Billy down. Because if Harrington is nervous, then maybe Billy doesn't have to be. It doesn't make sense, but he'll take it.

"I was drugged up to the gills at the time," Harrington says, "but I saw you. You got between her and that thing, and you literally tried to hold it back with your bare hands. And then it ... and then you fell."

Billy remembers. The shock of it, the way all of him felt numb for a couple of blessed heartbeats, before the pain washed over him, dragged him under. He doesn't remember falling, though; suddenly he was just looking up at the broken ceiling, struggling to breathe.

When Harrington finally looks up to meet his gaze, his eyes are painfully earnest. "You died for us, man."

And *oh*.

He *died*.

Billy has to laugh. It hurts, and is more a huff of breath than an actual laugh, but Harrington sees it, and furrows his brow. "You don't understand, you literally *died*. You weren't breathing, and your heart stopped ... you flatlined twice on the way to the hospital. You didn't even breathe on your own until yesterday!"

Billy's still laughing. Or, trying to; the pain in his chest makes it hard, even with whatever painkillers he's on. He makes a face and tries to calm his breathing, and when he's got it under control he opens his eyes and sees that Harrington is still watching him, with a worried wrinkle between his eyebrows. It's almost enough to make Billy laugh again.

"You *died*, Billy," Harrington says, as if Billy didn't get it the first time.

"I know," Billy croaks. "I ... was there."

Harrington huffs out a surprised laugh at this, and something about it makes Billy's heart soar.

The woman's words, from so many years ago, echoes in his head.

Very few people get second chances. Those have to be earned.

And The only way out is through.

He's gone through most of his life knowing that nothing mattered, because he was going to die anyway. It didn't matter what he did, or what was done to him, because he didn't have a future. He was going to die, because that's what she told him.

He was too young to understand the rest of it. Because maybe, maybe death didn't have to mean the end. Maybe he could actually earn himself a second chance. He didn't ... He never thought that was a possibility. Not for him.

He's never gotten a second chance before, and now that he has it, he doesn't know what to do with it.

Is this what the woman saw? Is that what she was telling him? Billy suddenly wishes he hadn't run away from her; that he had stayed, apologized and asked her to explain. Because maybe then, he wouldn't have grown up thinking he was living on borrowed time. But, he thinks, that's just the thing. She *did* tell him; *you can't run*. Billy ran, and look where it got him.

He feels like laughing again, but knows that it will hurt so he holds back. He's unsurprised when he can feel tears run down his cheeks. Something have loosened in his chest (probably ribs, honestly), and despite his body feeling ten times heavier than usual, despite the pain and ache and fatigue – there's a sense of *freedom*.

So he cries. Silently, but of course Harrington notices. He clears his throat and gets up, pretends to be very interested in the pitcher of water that's standing on a side table. Billy doesn't care. He's too tired to be embarrassed about crying in front of Harrington.

When he feels like he can, he wets his lips again. Asks, "Can I ... have some more ... water?" A pause, and then he tacks on, "Please?"

Because he's starting anew; in a life he didn't think he would get.

He has already lived up to the woman's prophecy; he grew up angry, scared, violent. He was alone, for most of it. And he died.

Now he's born again – in July, he suddenly realizes, somewhat hysterically; a *child of summer* just like she said – and he has a whole life ahead of him. Nothing to live up to. He can start over. He's got nothing but time and a clean slate.

Or, he thinks when Harrington hands him another cup of water. Maybe not quite a clean slate.

"Thank you," he rasps, when Harrington helps him hold the cup steady. And, in the next breath, because there's no time like the present, "I'm sorry."

Harrington turns his head to the side in confusion, reminding Billy slightly of a puppy. "What for?"

Billy closes his eyes. Starting over isn't going to be easy, not with everything he's done – to Harrington and other people, and that's not to mention all the things he did while possessed by the shadow. But he has another chance, and he's determined to take it. To make it right, if he can. So he opens his eyes and says, simply, "Everything."

He would elaborate if he could – he's done a lot of shit things that he didn't care about when he thought he wasn't going to have to live with the consequences – but he is so tired. Even with the water, his throat feels like he's been gargling glass.

Harrington looks at him, and maybe he sees the sincerity in Billy's eyes. Or maybe Billy just looks that pitiful. Either way, he nods. "Okay."

And Billy feels like he's choking again – but not on blood, this time. "Thank you," he manages to get out, barely a whisper. There are tears again, but this time Harrington doesn't look away. Instead, he offers a tentative smile, and motions awkwardly behind him.

"There's a TV in here," he says, and it's a peace offering. "Don't know why, since you've been unconscious until now, but I guess you got one of the good rooms. What with almost dying a hero and all." His

tone is cautiously teasing. When Billy's lips twitch, Steve relaxes a little. "Wanna watch something?"

Billy sniffs, and uses back of the hand that isn't attached to an IV to wipe across his face. Then he nods, carefully, not trusting his voice to reply.

He falls asleep before even registering what show is on, to the drone of voices on the TV, the beeping of the machines, and the rustling of Harrington's clothes as he's trying to get comfortable in an uncomfortable hospital chair.

He doesn't dream.

When he wakes up, there's a nurse there instead. Harrington is gone. The nurse tells him that it's the middle of the night, and that they sent his friend home to get some sleep, and that Billy should get some more sleep too, if he can. That his body needs the rest, if it's to heal up properly.

Then she smiles and tells him that he's lucky to have such a good friend, who comes by every day, even when Billy wasn't awake for it. She tells him to treasure friends like that. That it'll be a long recovery, and he'll need all the help he can get.

And Billy nods. Takes her words to heart. And the next day, when he wakes up – Harrington is there. Offering him a smile, when he sees that Billy's awake.

It's not so difficult after all, to smile back.

Billy died young.

He's eighteen, when he gets a second chance at life.

Author's Note:

Unbeta'd, but I did read through it once to try to catch any errors. If you see any more, feel free to let me know.

Also, this idea got stuck in my head yesterday (which is honestly why I should never walk anywhere without distracting my brain with music or something, or it'll come up with new ideas), and I wrote all of it today.

Not a lot of thought was put into this. I just needed it out of my head.